

Something Old, Something New: Ethnic Weddings in Greater Lowell

An Exhibit by Eleanor Wachs and Ellen Nylen
Commonwealth Folklife Associates

PATRICK J. MOGAN
CULTURAL CENTER



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Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Saturdays 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

40 French Street, Lowell, Massachusetts

Something Old, Something New: Ethnic Weddings in Greater Lowell

This exhibit on ethnic wedding traditions represents a local component to the larger exhibit *Something Old, Something New: Ethnic Weddings in America*, which is simultaneously on display in the *Working People Exhibit* of the Mogan Cultural Center. Featuring photographs by Katrinka Thomas of New York City and co-sponsored by the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies of Philadelphia and *Modern Bride Magazine*, that exhibit celebrates ethnic traditions as they are passed down to succeeding generations over time.

The purpose of this Lowell-based exhibit is to acquaint visitors with wedding traditions as they are practiced in the neighborhoods of Greater Lowell and celebrated in homes, churches, temples, and catering halls. The exhibit affirms the importance of ethnicity, which thrives in Lowell, and affords an opportunity to view and learn more about wedding traditions, old and new.

Common to the wedding customs presented in this exhibit are the three themes of *tradition*, *ethnicity* and *personal identity*, which are continually realized through the treasured pictures and moments that have been shared by the participants for this community exhibit.

While weddings are commonplace, each couple creates, changes and re-fashions their own wedding to reflect their unique circumstances, their cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds and their personal wishes to have a perfect wedding day.

Tradition:

Many traditions related to weddings are part of our common knowledge, our folklore. For example, most brides wear white, step into a church right foot first to ensure happiness, walk down the aisle with a male family elder, and wear a veil which was formerly a sign of submission in her new role. Many folk customs and beliefs related to the wedding day have persisted over time and are passed down through family stories. For example, whoever catches the bridal bouquet will be the next to marry. Other folk beliefs, while seldom believed to be true, continue to be practiced. Some customs relate to things that cannot be controlled, such as the weather: *happy is the bride the sun shines on or rain on the wedding day brings unhappiness*. Or as our exhibit title implies: if the bride wears something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue on her wedding day, her marriage will bring her happiness.

Wedding cakes remain an essential part of the celebration and there are as many traditions that go along with the cake as there are cakes related to particular ethnic traditions. The bride is never to bake her own wedding cake and any unmarried girls who attend the wedding are to take home a piece of the wedding cake to put under their pillows that night in order to dream of their future spouses. Today, it is still customary for the bride and groom to take the top layer of the cake home to freeze and eat together on their first anniversary.

The origin of some customs, particularly those of Western countries, are less well known, although practices associated with these customs are common knowledge. The Bible mentions confirming an engagement by the gift of a ring to the prospective bride as a pledge to honor their agreement. History shows that this tradition was carried on in ancient Greece and Rome. It is still customary in contemporary Western society for a new groom to present his prospective bride with a diamond ring as a token of love and a promise that marriage is in their future.

Early European marriage arrangements tended to be based upon economics rather than love and were usually negotiated by parents, being too serious a decision to be left to young people. In Britain, from Anglo-Saxon times until the mid-sixteenth century, the groom or his family actually purchased his wife from her family and gave money or property known as the *wed* to the bride's father. This process became known as the *wedding*. In eighteenth century France, it was customary to pay after signing the marriage



Anna and Ted Szczechura
A Polish-American wedding in Lowell, circa 1957

contract. The bride also came with a small bundle or *truse* from which the word *trousseau* is derived. The *trousseau*, or dowry, was a replacement for the declining tradition of marriage by purchase. Even today, one occasionally hears the term *trousseau*, or hope chest.

Exchanging and wearing a wedding band, still a public symbol of matrimony, is a custom dating back to Biblical times. Exchanging rings confirms the importance of the union. The wedding ring's circular shape suggests that the couple are linked together for eternity. The tradition of placing the wedding ring on the fourth finger of the left hand (as is still done today in the United States) arose from the belief that a major artery ran from this finger directly to the heart. The honeymoon, which continues to be a time for newlyweds to sequester themselves following the wedding, is actually derived from the word *honey*. In medieval England, the couple was expected to drink *mead*, a wine made from honey, in celebration for a month (or moon).

While there seem to be more customs related to the bride, there are traditions related to a groom as well. For example, today as in the past, the groom is certain to select his own best man. Back in the days when brides were being abducted, the best man served as the groom's assistant. This role symbolically continues today as the best man is called upon to assist with the wedding ceremony and is expected to make the traditional toast at the wedding feast.

One important component of the wedding tradition involves events prior to the wedding. Out of the courtship period when the couples get to know one another there evolves a personal story: the family courtship story. Through many retellings this story is shaped into a finely honed tale where "reality is often transformed into verbal art." As folklorist Steven Zeitlin, notes:

Courtship stories, and, in particular, stories of a couple's first encounter effect a romantic transmutation of reality. Two persons meet as a result of some meaningless combination of circumstances... if they find themselves compatible and get married, an "alchemy of mind" transforms the incident into a rendezvous with destiny and the deepest sort of romance. 1

Couples who have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary needed little prompting to retell the



Margaret Shanahan

Susan and Steve Chapman
A Jewish wedding at Temple Beth-Elin, Lowell, 1991

circumstances in which they met. The personal stories of two couples who have been married for over fifty years are included in the exhibit text.

Ethnicity:

Ethnicity involves social relationships with members of a group who have a shared sense of identity, history, cultural patterns and styles. These cultural patterns and styles may be esoteric to a particular group, yet they can be shared in obvious and open ways with members outside the group.

In Lowell, where over fifty different ethnic groups express cultural traditions in a myriad of ways, we can easily forget that people express their ethnicity by choice since ethnicity is an *ascribed identity*. Members of the group decide for themselves the basis and the extent of their involvement within the ethnic circle. Membership is by descent and sometimes by intermarriage.

When we look closely, we see a blend of ethnic traditions that are often brought about by intermarriage, immigration, and acculturation. Because of this combination, brides and grooms feel at liberty to reformulate and reshape their own ethnic traditions and yet include "American" ones as well.

Personal Identity:

How does a couple fashion their own wedding so that it reflects their own personal identities and their identity as a couple? What ethnic touches might be



Seda and Dikran Kaligian
Armenian wedding customs old and new

incorporated into the wedding ceremony, the foodways, and the music, which are three of the standard components of any wedding? For the younger couples featured in this exhibit, creating a wedding often involved reviving past traditions and shaping them to modern circumstances.

In this exhibit, *Something Old, Something New: Ethnic Weddings in Greater Lowell* we see how seven couples of Greater Lowell create a personal wedding day that combines tradition, ethnicity and personal identity and celebrates their lives together.

Footnote

1. Steven J. Zeitlin, "An Alchemy of Mind': The Family Courtship Story," *Western Folklore*, XXXIX: 1, January 1980: 17-33.

References:

William J. Fielding, *Strange Customs of Courtship and Marriage*, New York: The New Home Library, 1942.

Gail F. Stern, ed., *Something Old, Something New, Ethnic Weddings in America*, Philadelphia: The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1987.

William Tegg, *The Knot Tied: Marriage Ceremonies of All Nations*, Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970.

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American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
Flowers by Albert
House of Concetta
Immigrant City Archives
Lowell Historic Preservation Commission
Lowell Museum Cultural Fund
Lowell National Historical Park
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New England Folklife Center of Lowell

Commonwealth Folklife Associates is a new organization that works cooperatively with museums, cultural organizations, government agencies, businesses and educators to document, preserve, promote and present folklore, cultural traditions and folk artists throughout Massachusetts.

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THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts." The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage.

This former Boott Mills boardinghouse, built around 1837, was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. A wide variety of cultural programs is offered here throughout the year. The Center also houses the University of Massachusetts at Lowell Center for Lowell History, and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education.

LOWELL HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission was authorized in 1978 "to tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a 19th century setting by encouraging cultural expression in Lowell." Its historic preservation program works to preserve historic buildings and create a recreational trail along Lowell's canals. Its cultural programs interpret the Commission's themes through public art, performing arts, cultural grants, exhibits, conferences, publications, folklife, oral history, ethnic heritage and labor projects. For further information, call (508) 458-7653.

LOWELL OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs co-sponsors temporary exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center through its Cooperative Agreement with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

The mission of the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs (LOCA) is to identify the ways and means to expand cultural opportunities and choices. LOCA manages the Lowell Museum Cultural Fund which provides a financial resource for those who create, present, and preserve the culture of the city through exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center. For information or to receive The Local, a bi-monthly calendar of Lowell events, call (508) 459-9899.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing an exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center on its themes, should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission at 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, MA 01852, (508) 458-7653. A staff member will send you an application and if approved, your proposal will then be recommended to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.